

Abigail: Hello hello! This is Abigail popping in to say that Back Again, Back Again now has a Ko-Fi! If you're enjoying the show and would like to support its creation, consider stopping off at ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast to buy me a coffee! Not only will you be thanked in the next episode, but if you leave me an arguably pg-13 topic in the comment box, I'll write you an absolutely ridiculous little limerick about it to read out on the show, too. I can't promise that it will be, like, top-tier poetry, but it'll be silly!

And if that's not your vibe, or you can't donate - oh my god! No problem at all! I'm just so happy that you took the time to listen to the show!!

I hope you have a wonderful day! Onto the episode!

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty three: Soldier, Part two.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I don't want to talk for long about the battle. We went to bed and got up and marched towards the rebel camp as the sun woke up. I rode on a white horse, a harbinger from a story, and death-gripped the reins, never comfortable in this role. My sword hummed at my side -- I could feel the magic in the trees all around me. The forests of Rhysea are distinctly magical -- everything is in balance. They all grow and die and feed the things after them, trees give shelter and birds give belonging and thousands of tiny ants march along, drawing patterns too small for us to see and too big to ever truly realize. It's peace and calm and it's like... finding loose change and the rattling in your car finally stopping. It's the absolute relief that silence brings.

It didn't calm me as much as it usually did -- I was too jumpy to find much solace in anything, no matter how much it reached for me.

The rebels were packing when we reached them. All of them were armed. They'd learned we were coming, it seemed, and they'd wanted to outrun us. Not to stay and fight.

We stayed and fought. I didn't disappear anyone, but -- I killed more than one person. Because they were trying to kill me. Because I feared they would. Because getting stabbed hurt and I didn't want it to happen again.

Because none of them were very well trained, these people, and they were easy to make fall.

I did what Cassian said to, among all of it. I used my magic and made some sort of display, but more than anything, my sword glowed -- maybe *glowered* is the right word -- and I watched as their faces drained of color before they were cut open.

The rebels did not run ahead and run away. We killed them and burned their bodies and three ran off into the woods and *let them go*, Cassian said, *so everyone knows who we have on our side*.

I did get hurt. Cut across the leg real deep. I think he was trying to gut my horse.

Victory is a lot less exciting when you see how it's done.

We marched through the town we sheltered outside the night before, and the silence within was so absolute that you could almost hear the thrum of the trees. Solemn. Not unhappy faces -- because this village had been dangerously close to sheltering rebels -- they had to have known -- but they weren't foolish. They just lacked... everything. Allegiance or anguish or animosity. They mostly lacked anger - an absence so profound it had to be deliberate. One girl didn't hide it from her face, the hatred, and her sister stepped in front of her as I passed by.

They knew what we had done. But they'd just seen what happens to those who don't bow.

And yet they all still bowed -- bowed for the prince, bowed for the Vatakina Eligida. Because we were their sovereign. Because we were an army marching through their town and the sounds of slaughter carry on the wind. Several of them made the sign the woman did, at the house where I first got taken to the castle -- *shoulder shoulder out press* -- and in this I could see their hatred. Their hurt. Their -- hope.

Hatred because of who I fought with. Hurt because of who I rode with. Hope that it would change and *there will come a soldier who will tear your city down.*

They looked to me to fix something I was only starting to comprehend. And I made a promise, deep inside my head.

I will, I said, I will try fix these things.

In the village center, Cassian and I dismounted. The village head, an old woman faded by the years, crowned us in golden laurels and flowers in shades of sunrise and gloaming. She was as expressionless as the rest of them as she placed the wreath upon my head -- but her eyes flashed for just a moment as she tilted my chin up to meet hers. And there it was - the force of will. The need to do right by these people. For them to have the chance to choose their own destinies.

I felt the magic spark into her palm. I watched her eyes glow, for just a second, some deep magic reawakened, before I got back on my horse and nodded -- all I could do in the moment.

But I brought it up three times to Cassian on the ride back -- because I still believed in his good. Cassian -- *later* -- Cassian it's important -- *later* -- Cassian -- *when we're alone*. And when we were alone: *when we can't be overheard*. Which I knew wouldn't be until we got back to the palace, and that even then privacy was a foregone thing. And I feared I would lose my resolve in the face of the kings and their thrones and the weight of expectation. Of being wanted. But that was why I was there, yes? To change things? I thought. To make things right.

We marched through the night, and as we arrived back into the arena, as the gates swing open and the soldiers flooded inside, to rest, to mourn for those lost -- eight lost, another four wounded so horribly they were left behind at the village to heal. Three stayed to watch over them, all wildly aware of the animosity around them and the target they now were, without the backings of an army.

Cassian hesitated outside the gateway, horse pulled to the side. I knew neither of us looked anything better than *haggard* at the moment, twenty-four hours out of sleep, but he hadn't become the princeling quite yet, his demeanor still changed.

I stopped beside him, fidgeting with the reins. Are you okay?

He grimaced. *There's still one other thing I have to do. Ilyaas, come with me?*

Of course, I said on instinct, and followed him out, down the roads into the villages that surrounded the castle. *What are we doing?* I asked, and only then did I notice the bundle strung across his back -- eight swords. Eight swords for the eight dead.

Oh, I realized, and didn't ask him to explain as we dismounted in front of a small house, flowers in the windows and laundry lines tied between it and the shed, as he knocked on the door, as I watched a mother's face break with a sort of anguish I could never truly describe.

Cassian hugged her as she clutched at him, and even with my shitty ears, with my shitty Rhysean, I could hear *why, why, why*.

A younger sister, all of six, seemed to realize what was happening. Cassian murmured his condolences and promised something I didn't have the words for as she sobbed, and as they looked to me -- searching for -- something, I pieced together a sentence from the nothing I had.

Sentinoc quera. Ilms seans fret.

I... feel sorry. She is brave.

Is instead of was. I didn't know the past tense -- it wasn't something that had been taught to me yet among key words and formal greetings and verbs of the now. *I am blessed. They are coming. He is the king.* And the way the mother looked at me -- as that is instead of was, at that small bit of hope. And the way the little sister, no more than six, how her head turned. How her eyes went wide -- because she hadn't quite understood death, and this was hope -- that marked the precise moment I realized my mistake.

I knew the word for *magic* when it came out of the girl's mouth.

And I knew the word for *dead* when it came out of Cassian's.

Cassian gave the mother the soldier's locket and the sister the girl's sword and taught me the word for *was* the second we left the house. *Seans* to *sians*. *Ilms sians fret*.

Back at the palace, seven houses later. Riding through and seeing celebration with *Ilms seans-sians fret* running through my mind and an already long-healed scar on my leg. I don't remember getting off my horse or walking up to my room but I do remember Rhia crushing me into a hug as I slowly explained everything to her.

She explained the gesture to me, finally. *Shoulder-shoulder out-cross*. All the things it means -- a long history, not the

abbreviated version Cassian had told me that first day after court. Then she promised to make me a list of past-tense verbs.

And when I told her of Cassian's later-later-later and the way the village looked at me to save them all -- from what? From what? From the people I rode with, I started to realize, she promised to tell me the truth. To tell me the *everything* I wasn't supposed to know.

It starts with the prophecy, she said, and ends with a death. But there's a lot in between. And there's a lot that I don't know.

Tell me anyways, I said. Tell me everything you know.

I will, she promised. Tomorrow night. There were bars on my windows now, still, but like Cassian had said -- *find somewhere where no one's listening* -- she promised to find a place, too.

But there's -- there's one more thing I should explain, before I go. Because here, everything gets set into motion.

Here -- picture the scene. It's dinner. You sit with two kings and a prince. You're starting to suspect they're the tyrants and not the saviors. You're starting to doubt a lot of things and have a promise to keep with people you never spoke words to and you have a promise to keep to a girl who's finding a place safe enough to tell the secrets of the world. And you're not thinking about dinner, or the prince, or the kings, because of promises you made.

This is when the queen says, *I've been thinking about matrimony.*

Oh? You say, casually, suddenly no longer so preoccupied. The king has left since you last looked up, off to indulge in the fruit or flesh or just to take a really long nap. You suddenly feel awfully cornered, even though you hadn't spoken much to the king since the day you pulled the sword from the tree, but his impartialisms made him seem a friendly party at this table. *Your own, or just generally?*

Cassian's, she responds, in the same sort of tone you pulled your *oh?* From. That is, from your ass. Cassian is red, you see, when you sneak a headlong glance at him, but not red enough that this is new to him.

Oh, you say again, because now there is no doubt where this is going.

Do you know how to politely refuse a power grab in the form of a marriage proposal given not by the bridegroom but by his mother? You get up from the table and walk out. Just set your napkin in its place and go back up to your room.

And then you ignore Cassian when he pounds on the door of your room and asks to explain. And you focus on the doorhandle and you push at it with your magic and say the nice little words so it glows with heat, so then when he tries to grab it to come in anyways he curses and asks again instead of forces.

You sit in your room and you try not to think.

And the next day, when the queen announces the engagement before the court as you stand at her shoulder and Cassian comes around to your other, you pretend like you'd known all along. Like there was consent given.

Because these people don't know the English words for *this isn't the truth*. And you don't know how to say them in Rhysean, either. So you wait for Rhia to tell you everything she knows and you start planning how to get away.

This is where the story begins. It starts with a prophecy and a girl with lion hair almost being run over by a cart, but the day the promises were made and false ones were created and a girl whispered to the eligida *this is all that I know* was when it truly began.

You'll hear everything soon. The story, the prophecy, the engagement and the words exchanged and the lot of it. I need to get my thoughts in order before then.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr

@backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.